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TRY "CUSTOM FRENCH" - WE DID.

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TO CIRCUMVENT LARGE ENROLLMENTS AND A TEACHER SHORTAGE, UTILIZE MODERN EQUIPMENT, AND STILL RETAIN PERSONAL CONTACT WITH INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS, INSTRUCTORS AT ANTIOCH COLLEGE DESIGNED A NEW PROGRAM FOR FRENCH I, II, AND III CLASSES. THE CORE OF THE COURSE WAS A SET OF 39 FILMS WITH SCRIPTS WHICH SERVED AS A BASIS FOR CONVERSATIONS. ALL STUDENTS FROM THE THREE COURSES MET TOGETHER TO VIEW THE FILMS AND SLIDES, SING POPULAR SONGS, AND PARTICIPATE IN GROUP GRAMMAR PATTERN DRILLS. A SYLLABUS OUTLINED MINIMUM READING REQUIREMENTS FOR EACH LEVEL. INDIVIDUAL ORAL WORK OCCURRED IN SMALL CONVERSATION GROUPS SUPERVISED BY FACULTY MEMBERS ASSISTED BY UPPERCLASS STUDENTS WHO HAD SPENT A YEAR IN FRANCE. BECAUSE EACH STUDENT IN THE EXPERIMENTAL COURSE WAS PERMITTED TO PROCEED AT HIS OWN PACE AND ACTUALLY DEVISE HIS OWN COURSE BASED ON HIS INTEREST, ABILITY, AND MOTIVATION, STUDENTS WERE FREE TO CHANGE CONVERSATION GROUPS AS THEY PROGRESSED AND WERE ENCOURAGED TO DISCUSS SPECIFIC PROBLEMS IN PRIVATE CONFERENCE WITH AN INSTRUCTOR. COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION BOARD TESTS WERE USED TO MEASURE ACHIEVEMENT, WHICH PROVED EQUAL TO OR BETTER THAN THAT OF TRADITIONALLY TAUGHT CLASSES, WHILE THE NEW APPROACH GENERATED MUCH STUDENT INTEREST IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY. REFER TO FL 000 399 FOR THE SYLLABUS OF THE COURSE. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "THE TENNESSEE TEACHER," JANUARY 1967. (GJ)

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Try "Custom French"—We Did

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It is a great temptation, in these days of rising costs and teacher shortages, to "hire" the wonder machines of the "audio visual age," feed them directives and information, and let them disgorge instant education on signal. But being no longer satisfied with pouring inert knowledge into students and calling it education, we know that in many fields the wonder machines can do but half the job. In the field of languages, the human element remains a requisite.

Yet this field, where the need for human contact is manifest, is one hard hit by the teacher shortage. The small class that we have always accepted as an absolute necessity in teaching students to read, write, and speak another language no longer seems possible in the face of growing enrollments. Yet we cannot allow the student to become merely a cipher with a headphone set in a laboratory. We value the audio visual contributions in the teaching of grammar, reading-writing knowledge, and pronunciation. But there remains the all-important oral ability; and this requires planned conversation periods limited to small numbers of students.

At Antioch we are faced with all these problems plus one not usually encountered in language teaching: Antioch's work-study program requires that students be away from academic work for specific job periods each year —thus interrupting their academic work at regular intervals. Since we are on an eleven-week quarter system, work in any course in which a basic skill is to be learned must be completed in one quarter in order to avoid interruption for a job period. Our basic courses in French (French I, II, and III) move from elementary study through the beginnings of an introduction to French Literature. We expect students to proceed from I to II to III, completing a year of college work in each quarter.

This is a very fast pace, but it was this very speed that gave rise to our experiment.

It had become clear that students were able to absorb material faster than we had believed possible. Exceptional students could even score high enough on national CEEB tests to warrant allowing them to waive the following required course in the sequence. These latter students would actually go beyond the limits of a course, devising individual courses for themselves (with extra reading and extra contact time). *Why, then, we asked ourselves would it not be possible to organize the whole series as a class in which guidelines were set up, but in which every student could actually devise his own course, limited only by his own interest, ability, and motivation?*

Basically, this is exactly what we have done. Each student can proceed in his study of French at his own rate

of learning, set by his own motivation, interest, and ability. He is no longer bound rigidly by his enrollment in a particular class, for with a do-it-yourself plan, all students, potentially, have a chance to achieve what had been reserved for the occasional student. Yet the average student is not sacrificed, for he can still proceed at the usual pace without penalty.

We began our "Custom French" by exploiting the positive aspects of large numbers of students—areas in which they could benefit from one another: less inhibition in pronouncing foreign sounds, learning from one another, hearing more accents, and singing songs together. Then, although mixed levels within a class have mixed blessings, we thought if the beginning levels could be pooled there would be less temptation for a student with some high school study to enroll in a course below his ability due to a language inferiority complex. (We also believed his greater entering knowledge could benefit beginners—if they did not feel they had to compete against him in class.)

We started by combining the students of French I, II, and III into one class. This meant seventy-seven students in our first experiment—a breathtaking sight that first time.

We provided each student with a syllabus that outlined the course, stated minimum requirements for each level, and encouraged him to go beyond the requirements of the class for which he had registered formally. For motivation we also advised each student that he would take the CEEB test at the end of the term. If he scored beyond the requirement for his class, he would be allowed to waive the next course and go directly into an upper level.

The core of the course for all three levels was the set of Hachette's thirty-nine films, *En France comme si vous y étiez.* With clear French these generally excellent and imaginative films deal with many aspects of daily life and provide the basis for conversation. The script of the films was the only "grammar book" the students had (except that during the term we made available formal grammars for the occasional student who needed the reassurance of memorizing rules.)

For French II and III students, there were also slides with taped lectures on *L'Histoire vue à travers les arts.* These were on a more advanced level, but we encouraged the French I students to enter the sessions as soon as they felt capable of understanding the material. (They could enter at any point since the information in one session was not necessary to the understanding of the next.)

We emphasized quantity and constancy in reading French. The syllabus listed the minimum amount of reading for each level and added a long list of additional suggested readings. We allowed each student to choose his own reading material if he felt so inclined, although we encouraged him to check with his instructor as to the level of difficulty. We pointed out that reading was an easy way for any student to have constant individual contact with the language. The more he read, the more familiar he could become with vocabulary, construction, and phrasing.

In the writing area we encouraged students to write as much or as little as interested them. We assured them that all written work would be read and corrected. This is one of the more difficult areas of accomplishment and one we feel is better perfected on upper levels of study. Particularly so, since we have noted that some students study language to prepare for travel and study abroad, others for graduate school requirements, still others for a Berlitz knowledge; generally they do not study for composition purposes. Therefore, we do not emphasize writing; we leave it up to the individual student.

Those were the ways in which we provided for reading, writing, and listening.

To cope with the conversational periods, we simply divided the class into eight small groups of students. Since we could not afford more full time faculty to man the groups, we hired five upper class students for two hours each week to act as student managers and work along with our regular French assistant and the instructor. This was not expensive and the student managers were enthusiastic since it gave them a chance to keep their French alive. (Antioch is fortunate in having an "Education Abroad" program and all of these students had studied or worked in France for a year.)

But most important, the conversation groups were small and each student could participate. The basis of conversation could be any material, but primarily we used the film scenes because they held the grammar and vocabulary that were building the student's knowledge of French.

We shifted our student managers from group to group every few weeks for several reasons: 1) to give all the students a chance to hear different accents; 2) to relieve personality clashes; and 3) to give the teacher a chance to become acquainted with each student's ability and to fill in gaps.

Once the student was in the course, we forgot which particular level he was registered for. This was particularly

Antioch Notes has long had a place on this editor's "must read" list. The format of this small publication—small in the same sense that Elements of Style *is a small book—is attractive and always makes me feel that I have just come upon an antique folder beautifully produced in hand-set type. Its greatest attraction, however, is the graceful and lucid writing that unfailingly goes right to the heart of whatever matter is the subject of the month.*

The subject for last April was "Custom French for Large Groups." And we thought the ideas and accomplishments of the Antioch experiment so good and so applicable to secondary school language instruction that we immediately contacted Aaron B. Everett and asked him to write about "Custom French" for THE TENNESSEE TEACHER.

The article here is the result. And since parts of it contain ideas originally expressed in Antioch Notes, *we wish to thank that publication twice—once for calling the experiment to our attention and again for allowing us to quote from it freely.*—SARA S. NOLAN

useful in the conversation groups. The oral area of a foreign language is the one into which most students enter with fear and trepidation (in spite of any high score they may make on entrance tests). In our set-up we are able to let the students place themselves according to their *oral ability;* that is, a student can choose his conversational group—can join whichever group he feels comfortable in. He is free to place himself with French I students even though he may be registered in II or even III. As he develops in his conversational ability he simply moves from his group to a more advanced one and keeps going as far as he can.

In addition to participating in these conversational groups, students are expected to come in on an individual basis to discuss reading and writing problems with the instructor. Thus the individual student has another opportunity to discuss and to talk in French on a very individual basis indeed.

Another device we use in class which greatly pleases (and greatly disturbs nearby faculty members!) is class singing. We learn two new songs each week—recorded on tape with the words mimeographed and passed out to class. The songs we have used so far are all currently popular French songs; they range from those of Edith Piaf to Johnny Hallyday.

Numbers here are to our advantage: no one minds about not being able to carry a tune—who would ever know in the midst of a booming tape recorder and seventy-seven accents!

Songs serve several purposes: students can hear French, understand it, and acquaint themselves with various accents. In this way, patterns, idioms, and vocabulary are painlessly learned and retained without effort due to the insistent quality of a tune. Songs provide students with a big dividend: French phrases they can transfer to conversation naturally and without conscious thinking.

"Homework" is up to the student. He actually has to do nothing other than absorb what is done in class during the period. We do provide extra evening showings of the films and we do play the taped lectures; so a student can go over the day's work if he wishes. In addition, if a student wishes to do more individual work, tapes of the sound tracks of the films are available in the library and he can borrow them along with a tape recorder that can also be checked out. (Tapes of the songs are also available in the library.)

The class pattern in a typical week is kept to simple lines. Three days a week the entire class meets together. We begin with a song or two; follow this immediately with a film of *En France comme si vous y étiez*; and devote the period following the films to pattern drills and grammar presentation supported by constant use of an overhead projector, using personally developed materials. Grammar is presented through pattern drills, with emphasis on repetition *en masse*. Generally the last quarter hour of these class periods is given over to the *spectacles* I shall describe below.

Twice a week the II's and III's (and the I's as time goes on) view the slides of *L'Histoire vue à travers les arts* and listen to the accompanying tape. This is followed by the small conversation groups in which the material just viewed and the previous day's film serve as a start for the conversational period. (Originally songs were used on these days also, but experience has proved that time is better spent on oral work.)

The *spectacles* (spontaneous or prearranged live entertainment) serve both as a learning device and as a change of pace. These *spectacles* can be in any form and in any media; our own performances have included a short violin performance, talks about our experiences in France, and parodies —all in French, all exploiting vocabulary and grammar and syntax to the fullest. A delightful .by-product of these spectacles is the stimulation they offer to the students to perform for their own and their peers' benefit. They do scenes from plays, both classical and modern; sing folk songs; hold readings of poets; and do original versions of modern songs—all explained or acted in French.

As in the past, we use the CEEB examinations at the end of the term to determine the achievement level of each student. Results for our first experimental group showed that class averages were at least as good as those of previous classes taught by the same teacher; in some areas they were better. French I and II students performed as well as those in previous classes conducted by traditional methods and for smaller numbers. French III students outperformed all previous classes by several percentiles.

These figures do not tell the whole story, however. In previous classes, students likely to fail (prognosticated on the basis of early tests) were encouraged to drop the course. Thus about a 20 per cent drop was effected, leaving a highly language-oriented group. Under this new program (based on the contention that it was formulated to meet the needs of slow, average, and above average students) no one is asked to drop. It can readily be seen, therefore, that though the scores (figure-wise) are similar, the students in the new program actually out-performed all previous classes.

But most important of all is the fact that the new program is serving more people: 1) individuals who would have been eliminated under the previous program are successfully completing the course; and 2) those who are able to proceed at a faster rate and thereby waive a successive course or two are increasing in numbers.

Our teaching of foreign languages is based on the belief that pattern drills are an effective method for mastering grammar material and that they also establish a good basis for oral ability. These are instilled by constant repetition, done in u n i s o n; they are supported by use of overhead transparencies with grammar points. By means of these the conjugations and grammar examples are presented—actually during the practice session—so that the student can visually check himself while saying the phrase. We realize that this is contrary to the usual concept in audio-lingual approaches; but we operate on the assumption that there is no use fighting the twelve years of highly visual training that the students have already had.

Formal explanation of grammar rules is kept to a minimum. This obviously varies from class to class and from grammar point to grammar point. But in general such explanations are avoided if it is at all possible.

At Antioch we had long used songs, because we had found them to constitute a fund of memorized material requiring minimum effort on the part of the student.

With regard to the required and optional reading, as mentioned above, we find that vocabulary increases in almost direct proportion to the amount of reading done. It has the added ad-

vantage of being constantly available, not dependent on the presence of a teacher.

Conversation is emphasized because we feel that the oral use of a language makes it become a part of the speaker, thus enhancing and aiding in the learning of it. Our work in conversational groups is sufficient for most students; but for those students concerned with real mastery of French, we offer the advantage of individual conversational periods. (When we first offered these there was not an inundation as was darkly predicted by our peers, but we were pleasantly occupied coping with the more eager students.)

There has been an enthusiastic reception of our "Custom French" course on the part of the students. More frequently than in the past, students in the experimental year did far more work than was expected—though there were no specific assignments. Class attendance, though still voluntary as previously, is noticeably higher and more regular. There are frequent (and most welcome) comments that the classes are interesting and fast-moving. Another consideration—though last it should not be ignored!—is the fact that teaching elementary French courses in this format is a lot more fun for the instructor.

A recurring question on the part of both students and faculty colleagues centered on what kind of a course would be offered to students who are not able to pass through the entire series in one quarter's time. The contention is that these students "the second time around" would be repeating the same course, thereby nullifying its value for any but the "first-timers."

It is our feeling that there will probably be less repetition for students in any part of this course than in a traditional one since so much of the work varies and a great deal is done in conjunction with other personnel or in independent study.

First of all, the only material that is repeated is the set of films that present grammar and syntax. They simply replace the book the student has in a traditional course. It should be remembered, too, that if a student had passed on to a usual II or III class he would necessarily still be studying the same French grammar. The text titles change from "Introductory French" to "Second Year French," but the essentials do not change. If a student in the Antioch program has not scored high enough to pass through the entire series, further exposure to the same study seems quite in order.

As to the other materials: There are thirty sets of slides in the *L'Histoire vue à travers les arts,* enough to cover three different offerings of the course. It is highly unlikely that a student would repeat this material. Songs change every term—though by popular demand some will be retained as encores. Conversation groups will change each term—with new participants, new managers, new topics. And reading possibilities are well nigh inexhaustible.

Since this program (like Antioch's philosophy generally) is so flexible, it will also be possible for a student, depending on his weak spots, to enroll for a second time in the course without attending the film sessions. Independent work in the grammar area is entirely feasible.

Actually we went so far as to omit some of the minimal requirements in special cases. Where students felt such an extreme lack of interest or were so inhibited as to make the conversation area impossible for them, we simply omitted the active participation for them in the conversation groups.

Our new program had several tangent and unexpected benefits. Student involvement in the *spectacles* was spontaneous and mutually rewarding; participants welcomed the invaluable opportunity for using French. More students became interested in continuing language study—if not to become majors, at least to pursue courses beyond the college requirements. Also, all teachers like to introduce French culture and civilization into early courses, but it is often dry and artificial. The *spectacles*—our experiences in France, use of natives, discussion of French economy, etc.—allowed a cultural presentation in a natural setting.

Thus through our "Custom French" we feel we have turned the high enrollments and teacher shortages in elementary French classes to our advantage. We have been able to capitalize on the positive aspects of large numbers while keeping the desires and needs of the individual student to the fore. Each student is actually able to have a custom-tailored course in French I and/or II and/or III. He sets up his course for himself alone—in the midst of seventy-seven students. Far from sacrificing either the average or the superior student, we feel we serve both of them better.

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(UNCLE SAM, that is)

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